



**The Fourth corporal work of mercy: “Shelter the homeless”  
Father Kolbe: a welcoming man**

**The words of Matthew 25: 35, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” mark all of Israel’s history. “You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt.” (Lv 19:34)**

Welcoming the other is welcoming God.

**Pope Francis, in the message for the World Day of the Immigrant and the Refugee, says:**

*At the root of the Gospel of mercy, the meeting and the welcoming of the other cross with each other and the welcoming of God; don’t let hope and the joy of living that spring from the experience of the mercy of God, manifested in the persons that you meet along your journeys be robbed from you! I entrust you to the Virgin Mary, Mother of the immigrants and the refugees, and to Saint Joseph, that have lived the bitterness of emigrating in Egypt.*

**Who is the “pilgrim” of the fourth work of mercy?**

Is it the unknown traveling stranger who asks for hospitality for a night?

Perhaps even the poor wanderer, the stranger, the transient? Those who escape wars, persecutions and hunger?

Welcoming the refugees is a corporal and spiritual work of mercy. Today we are dramatically questioned by the massive migrant phenomenon, that places men and women from poor countries, made uninhabitable from wars and violence, in contact with us. We can’t forget that a few paces from more or less expensive hotels, on the benches in the parks and on the sidewalks, we find ever thicker masses of those “without a home” who protect themselves with rags and cardboard. Today, our cities often refuse them even these public spaces to remove them from our sight and our conscience.

**Hospitality is a true challenge. Hospitality can become an opportunity for conversion.**

From the urgent necessity to give shelter and a home, we go to hospitality as a profession of faith in God who gave the earth as a habitat for every man. The Psalmist sings: *“The earth is the Lord’s and all it holds, the world and those who live there (Ps 24:1).* David confesses: *“For all in heaven and on earth is yours; yours, O Lord...We stand before you as aliens: we are only your guests, like all our fathers”* (1 Chronicles 29: 11, 15).

***Numerous testimonies reveal that between autumn and winter of 1939-40, Father Kolbe was able to give help to many in need without caring if they were Christian or Jewish.***

**Eddie Gastfriend, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz:**

*There were many priests at Auschwitz. They weren’t wearing any distinction, but you know they were priests by their manner and their way of acting, especially towards the Hebrews. They were so gentle, so affectionate. Those Hebrews among us that came into contact with the priests, like **Father Kolbe**, felt those were emotional moments in which **a pact of blood between Christians and Hebrews was established...**<sup>1</sup>*

At **Niepokalanow** everyone was welcomed with particular care and affection: the friars assured that their Jewish guests could celebrate their feasts and holidays. Their tenderness and dedication moved them to tears. The day of departure they thanked the convent for the hospitality and one of them, in the name of all, expressed: *“If God can allow us to survive the war, we will exchange Niepokalanow a hundredfold. We won’t forget this generosity towards us and we will talk of this to the foreign press and the London Times.”*<sup>2</sup>

***“Come closer, says the foreigner. Two steps from me, you are still too far away. You see me for what you are and not for what I am.”***<sup>4</sup>

Let’s get closer to see the face of our brothers. We want to welcome, at least in our heart, many poor people who debark every day on our coasts and knock at the door of our hearts.

Angela Esposito MIPK

---

<sup>1</sup> Maximilian Kolbe, Patricia Treece, Immaculata Press, BO, 1996, pg. 174

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Claude R. Foster

<sup>4</sup> E. Jabes, *Uno straniero con, sotto il braccio, un libro di piccolo format*, pg. 98